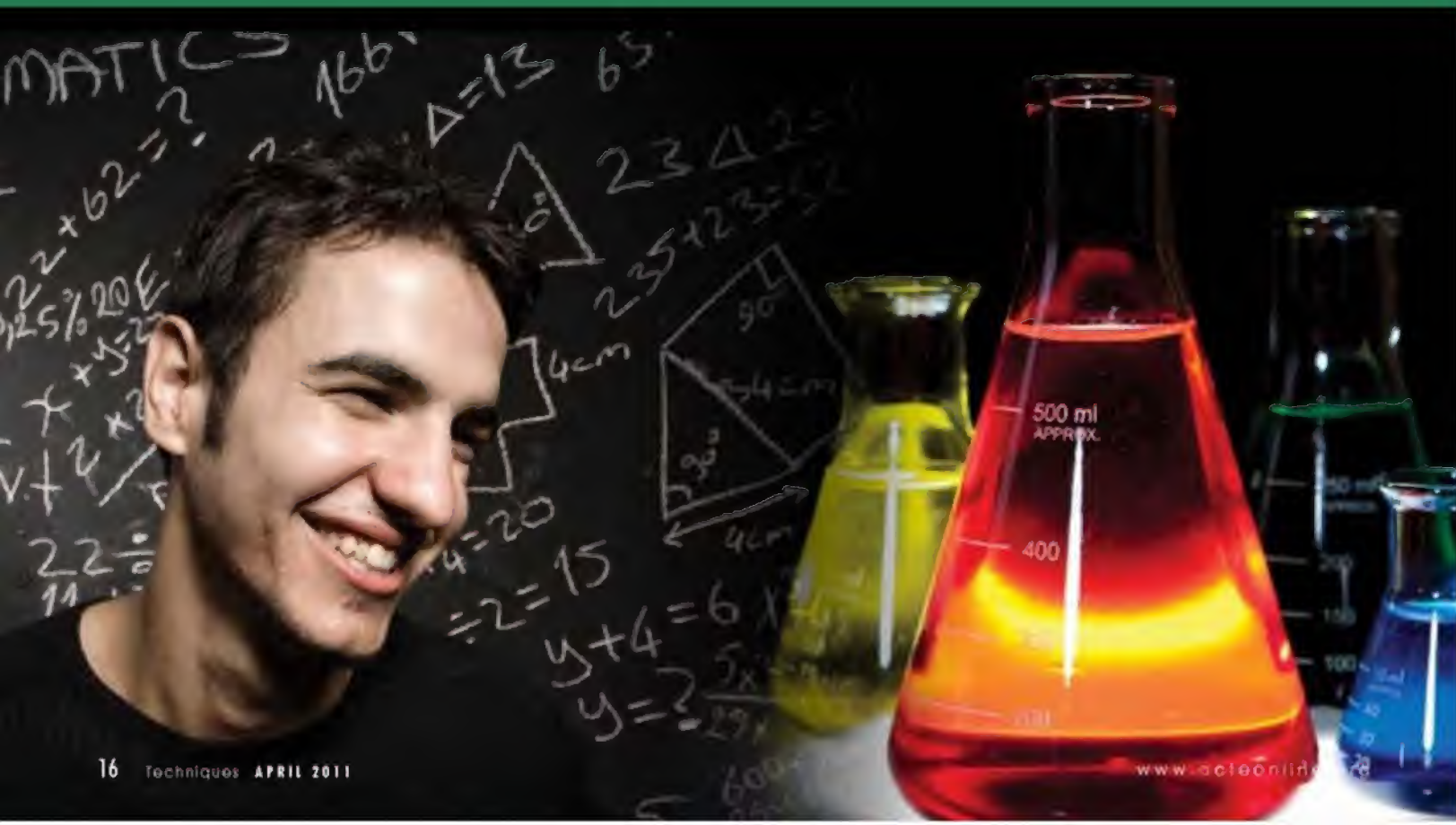


Changing the IMAGE of CTE





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BY SABRINA KIDWAI

During the 20th century, vocational education prepared students for entry-level jobs in occupations that did not require additional education or training beyond high school. Back then programs focused mainly on agriculture, business (primarily clerical), and trade and industry. Other vocational education programs included automotive, construction trades, food services and cosmetology; all of these programs were designed primarily to serve students who did not plan to go to college.

Times have changed, however. Global economic competition is increasing and the need to develop a workforce with advanced skills is critical. The push to find

sources of sustainable energy, the growing demands of the health care field and that of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM)-related sectors are all driving the high-demand jobs in today's growing workforce. Vocational education is now career and technical education (CTE) and it is evolving and adapting its programs to meet the needs of business and industry.

Much Changes, Much Stays the Same

While the field of CTE is changing, the perception of it has not. The general public, policymakers and media have a misconception about the quality, rigor and relevance of CTE programs today. The negative perception of CTE is not only

happening in the United States. ACTE has met with international delegations from several countries, including China, Ukraine, Saudi Arabia and Iceland. During each of these international visits, participants discussed how the stigma of CTE (that it is the refuge for not-so-smart students) affects the number of students entering CTE professions.

The stigma of CTE as the domain for students not going onto a four-year degree program still exists in the United States. After the State of the Union Address this year, YouTube hosted a live chat with Education Secretary Arne Duncan. Near the end of the interview, Secretary Duncan received a question from a woman in New Jersey about the decline of CTE schools.

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The question was: "Why have high schools abandoned vo-tech programs? Plumbers, electricians, carpenters, auto mechanics all make decent livings, but schools don't offer the proper education in these fields anymore and these are the kids who choose to drop out."

Secretary Duncan responded, "I think it's an accurate critique. As a country, I think we did a better job teaching CTE programs 30 to 40 years ago, but somehow we lost our way. I think we have to invest in these careers as well as whole other sets of new careers in the world of technology. Around the country, there are places that are doing this well, but they are pockets of excellence."

Although CTE educators submitted questions about CTE for this interactive chat and the one with President Obama, the people involved with the process chose a question about CTE's decline, even though the complete opposite is true. There were more than 14.4 million students taking a CTE course during the 2007-2008 school year—up from 9.6 million in 1999. Not to mention that CTE is more rigorous than ever because of legislative mandates and the changing workforce landscape.

Is the Tide Turning?

In the last few years, the mentioning of CTE by policymakers and the media has increased, and education reform advocates are taking note of CTE's potential in school reform. Harvard Graduate School of Education released a report this year titled "Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century," (see page 14). The report characterizes CTE and work-based learning as underutilized. The authors

promote a broader vision of school reform that embraces multiple pathways, asserting that the national strategy for education and youth development has been too narrowly focused on an academic chalk and talk approach. In reference to the Harvard report, Duncan had this to say: "For far too long, CTE has been the neglected stepchild of education reform," he said. "That neglect has to stop...CTE has an enormous, if often overlooked, impact on students, school systems and our ability to prosper as a nation." Secretary Duncan also stressed that K-12 educators have the responsibility to prepare all students to be college- and career-ready, "not either/or."

The media coverage for this report focused on Duncan's remarks and if CTE programs can offer top-notch, well-aligned CTE programs. The answer is, of course, yes! Many leaders—from education to business and industry—and parents have recognized the value of CTE and understand the potential it offers, not only in preparing students for jobs that require technical skills, but also in engaging students in academic learning, raising the level of academic performance, and helping curb dropout. However, it's critical for CTE educators, students and business and industry to educate the media and other audiences about how CTE is an important partner in improving student outcomes.

Policymakers are beginning to make the connection between CTE and positive outcomes, but there is still much work to be done. CTE educators need to raise awareness with state and federal policymakers about how CTE has changed. One angle is to show how CTE incorporates STEM. The STEM fields are of great national interest to policymakers;

even now, in a sullen economy when jobs have dried up, there is a shortage of workers for the STEM fields. On Capitol Hill, there is a perception that CTE, academics and STEM are separate, but in reality, CTE programs are integrating academics and STEM into curriculums.

Increasing Public Awareness of CTE

There are several ways educators and students can increase the awareness of CTE, but it may require some extra work. Reaching out to the national media is one very effective method because it provides a platform to educate millions about the value of CTE in one go. Just last September, ACTE received a call from "The Today Show." NBC was hosting Education Nation, and the producers were doing a segment on CTE and wanted a national perspective. ACTE's Executive Director Jan Bray flew up to New York City to appear on the show.

During the four-minute segment, "The Today Show" showed clips of how CTE has changed to include advanced technology and the newer jobs within the CTE realm. Bray and a student provided a glimpse into how CTE engages students and allows them to gain the skills necessary to be successful in postsecondary education and the workforce. That appearance alone by Bray reached more than 3.3 million viewers.

It's important for CTE educators to reach out to the television media, including the national shows, to educate the producers about CTE and its inextricable link to student achievement, workforce development and job creation. The best way to inform the media is to send an e-mail introduction of who you are to the show, including how your CTE program

is making a difference. In the message, include data on how CTE is helping to reduce the dropout rate, preparing students to be college- and career-ready, and the rigor of your CTE programs. If you can, relate your CTE program to a national trend like training future students for the healthcare field or how your program is one of the few to train people in homeland security. In order for the media to know about the success of your program, and how CTE has changed, it's critical that you send information to them directly.

Another way you can educate the media is through editorial board meetings. You can either meet with the education reporter or editor, or the editorial board, to discuss issues in education and CTE. If there are budget cuts to CTE or an exciting initiative happening in your school or district—reach out to your local media! Reporters and editors are extremely busy covering different beats, especially with newsroom staffs shrinking. It's important to schedule time to meet with the media on a regular basis to keep them apprised of what's happening with CTE.

When I met with a newspaper reporter in Charlotte a few years ago, his knowledge and experience about CTE was from his old high school days. During the 45-minute meeting, ACTE members provided data about the number of students going onto two- and four-year colleges, graduation rates and student engagement. At the end of the meeting, the reporter was surprised. After that meeting, ACTE members knew that they needed to do a better job in educating the media about the success of what they do.

A way to inform your local community and policymakers about CTE is by writing letters to the editor or opinion editorials (Op-Eds). Policymakers and their staff read the local paper to keep apprised of what's happening in their local community. When a letter or Op-Ed is published about CTE, it not only serves to educate the public, it informs policymakers about CTE's impact in your community.

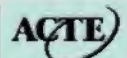
A new way to advocate and inform different audiences about CTE is through the use of social media, including education blogs. A national survey of reporters and editors revealed that 89 percent use blogs for story research, 65 percent turn to social media sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, and 52 percent utilize microblogging services such as Twitter. There are more than 2,000 media using Twitter, including more than 130 education reporters and editors. CTE educators should not only read education blogs, they need to reach out to the writers and raise their awareness about CTE—the role it plays in school reform, and how it prepares students to be college- and career-ready.

The Next Steps for CTE

In order to change the perception of CTE, CTE educators, students and the business community need to collaborate and launch a local and national public awareness campaign. This movement should inform media, policymakers and parents about how CTE has changed; an integral part of that campaign has got to be the inclusion of success stories, information about how programs are evolving and training the future workforce, and how CTE is helping students stay engaged in their learning. With the recent media coverage about CTE and Harvard's report, it should serve as a call to action for the CTE community. The CTE field should use this moment to not only educate, but to continue to improve teaching and learning and find creative ways to take all CTE programs to the next level. **I**

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